

Antifascist Gardening Tips

How to Deal With Sandburs



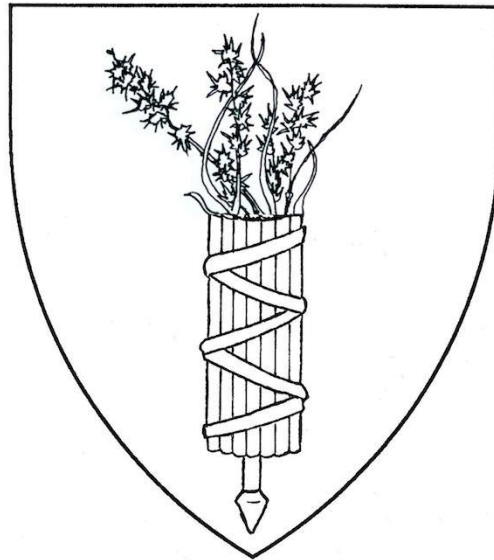
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Have you ever woken up one day to see the area where you live completely overgrown with fascism? Does resistance seem futile and fascism appear... everywhere? Does that feeling sound remotely familiar?

If yes, no worries, this essay aims to place that situation in perspective with (hopefully) some helpful tips about to effectively deal with it. (Read: I had a yard overrun by sandburs and I offer reflections here on how I dealt with it.)

If no, then maybe you got stuck on the term “fascism” so let’s begin with a working definition and get to “the root” of the matter.



Definition

When I write “fascism” here, I don’t refer to politics (at least not directly). I refer to “natural fascism.” I distinguish *natural* fascism from *political* fascism.² Whereas the latter involves political parties, elections, media, nationalism, and so on, natural fascism refers to foundational dynamics, traits, mentalities, and behavior patterns that make political fascism possible.

This essay uses real life facts and experiences with sandburs as an example of how natural fascism can manifest and how we might deal with it. Obviously, many superficial details do not translate but I think readers can figure out which dynamics seem relevant in terms of dealing with fascism in real life and which may not.

¹ Note: Read this essay as preliminary and tentative observations suitable perhaps in one bioregion but maybe not others. Take home whatever parts seem relevant and ignore the rest.

² “Fascism” stems from the Italian *fascio* (bundle) as in the left-wing revolutionaries Fasci Siciliani of 1893. From the ancient Roman *fascēs*, it came to signify power in union and solidarity and, via Mussolini, through nationalism more than labor unions (Paxton 2004: 4).

Natural fascism predates humans. For example, *sandburs*³ gradually developed over millions of years by creating sharp pricks that can hurt while they get attached to passersby who inadvertently help them spread and breed. Their ancient origins don't make them better or worse. It just means that we cannot pretend to ever eliminate them nor pretend that we as people, communities, or countries carry any particular immunity to fascism.

All of our bodies consist of the very particles that once composed thousands of sea otters, millions of sandburs, and billions of flowers. Nature folds fascism, compassion, and mutual aid alike in its cycles. But we may note that the *sandbur*, like fascism, particularly grows after industrial disturbance of land and the impoverished soil that lies in its wake.

By fascism, in this sense, I mean exhibition of the following traits:

1. **Survivalism.** Fascism reflects the survival mechanism of an organism experiencing a sense of existential desperation. It grew out of harsh environmental conditions and developed evolutionary techniques to survive (regardless of how uncomfortable its methods may feel for others). *Sandburs* thrive in poor soil (hence their name: not many plants can grow in sand).
2. **Competition and domination.** Fascism posits a zero-sum framework pitting one's own side *against* others ("us" vs. "them") rather than *with* others cooperatively for mutual benefit. The "fruit" of the *sandbur* consists of both its seed and its violence (an example of something like "rape culture" in botany).
3. **Coercive conformity.** Fascism, rooted in fear, encourages (and often enforces) uniformity in thinking and behavior. *Sandbur* plants produce no flowers—only seeds wrapped in spikes and, while individual plants may exhibit creative strategies to achieve their goals of survival and reproduction, *sandburs*, if left unchecked, can completely take over a plot of land eradicating diversity and replacing it with a harsh monoculture.
4. **Deceit.** Fascism fundamentally depends on deception. Without it, people (and animals) would naturally avoid the divisiveness, pain, and coercion that characterizes it. Survival and reproduction of fascism has therefore depended on deceiving anyone it encounters and tricking others into spreading its seed. Whether in birds, fish, or mammals, we see deception carefully utilized to spread a species. *Sandburs* grow in very close proximity to other plants which have a similar appearance (often intertwining with their roots which typically makes it very unclear where one plant begins and the other ends).

³ Also known as *sandspurs*, *sand burrs*, *grass burs*, *stickers*, *stickerweed*, *stickerburs* and *cenchrus spinifex* aka *cenchrus incertus* (the two Latin names equally apply). Also, see closely related species *cenchrus tribuloides*, *cenchrus longispinus/carolinianus* and *cenchrus echinatus*. See here for a comparison:
<https://nwwildflowers.com/compare/?t=Cenchrus+spinifex,+Cenchrus+echinatus,+Cenchrus+tribuloides,+Cenchrus+longispinus>

I cannot emphasize strong enough here that *fascism here refers to processes and behavior patterns—not people per se*.

Fascist mentality and frameworks *do* tend to reduce people to something like plants—something dominated by genetic determinism (e.g., ethnicity, sex) or culture (e.g., beliefs, sexuality, language) that “must” behave a certain way.

Yet, *antifascist* approaches recognize that humans—unlike plants—have both tremendous resilience *and* malleability—a capacity to develop and change behavior in unexpected ways. Some people may behave in fascistically but, in a different context with a supportive and nourishing environment, those same people may also learn to grow and thrive in more creative and mutually beneficial manners. Neo-Nazis have threatened to kill me but, far more often, they’ve engaged in civil dialogue. I have friendships with people (and species) across the spectrum. We share this giant eco-system of Earth and, aside from a minority of psychopaths, *most* people seek harmony... and dislike *sandburs*.

Background to this ground

At the younger end of ten siblings, I grew up on the same plot of land my entire childhood (once inhabited by the Kecoughtan). After both of our parents had passed away, we inherited the land and, rather than see it sold, I bought it from my siblings. Three weeks after the purchase, our childhood home, which our parents had designed and built, got hit by lightning and burned to the ground.

Unlike my parents who had our yard regularly mowed, I let the yard grow wild. Initially, this created some problems. One summer I counted 60 chigger bites on my body at the same time. That did not include several ticks I also found crawling on me that summer. In time, however, the problem abated. I let *dog fennel* grow large and unhindered throughout the yard. As a tick-repellent (and apparently chigger-repellent) plant, dog fennel seemed to change the eco-system and made it a lot easier to do yard work. (The number of ticks and chigger bites this summer? Zero.)

The wild yard and lack of chiggers and ticks help both humans and animals such as rabbits and deer who forage and sleep there. A family of six deer (now grown to eight) has essentially camped out on the yard all summer.

Yet, another problem with the yard remained a challenge: sandburs. We never had them on the yard growing up so I didn’t even think about them. Then, before I knew it, starting a few years ago, they had covered the entire lawn spreading over to my brother’s lawn next door.

Two summers ago, another dear brother, Frank, took his pugs for a walk on that land only to have sandburs get painfully wedged in the poor pups’ paws. Frank, a sort of secret anti-fascist (gruff on the outside but incredibly kind, sensitive, and compassionate on the inside), felt livid.

And he let me know it. The last time I saw Frank—a chance encounter on the street—he reminded me again about the yard and how I needed to deal with the sandburs (or “hitchhikers” as he called them). In fact, I could still hear him ranting with rage about it as he drove off.

I never heard his voice again.

Frank passed away last summer after a few days in a coma. Between his death and other developments, I didn't properly tend to the yard that summer. I also didn't plan well or even really know what to do.

I knew what I *didn't* want to do. I had looked up different methods online for getting rid of sandburs. They all involved awful options that seemed wholly undesirable such as:

(a) *keeping your lawn closely mowed*⁴ (for various reasons, I do not mow the grass: it wastes fuel, deprives the land of a rich biodiversity, and eliminates flowers for bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds);

(b) *place chemicals such as the toxic glyphosate*⁵ *at the roots* (as if we don't already have enough industrial chemicals in our soil); and

(c) *place a large plastic tarp over the area to suffocate and kill everything underneath it* (not that I had or would want a plastic tarp that large, but I also had no desire to kill all the existing foliage).

Living (and gardening) means engaging in violent behavior to some degree but we can choose the path of lesser violence. Subsequently, in order to harm no other plants, *I decided to pull up each sandbur by its root. One by one.*

So far, this method seems to cause the least harm to other plants (and animals). Time-consuming but effective.

Yet my ignorance in the beginning made that strategy ineffective. For example, last year I mistakenly uprooted an entirely different and unrelated patch of plants in July that looked a lot like sandburs. Then, I went out of town in early August (when sandburs crop up) and, by the time I returned, sandburs had covered the yard with huge patches—*thickets*—of prickly packets.

This summer I did my homework first and planned accordingly.

Now, many people don't have a home or even a place to safely rest their head—much less land to care for and nurture. But, for those that do, I submit my lessons and thoughts in dealing with sandburs, pulling them up at their root one by one.

⁴ Conventionally mowed lawns harm biodiversity, drain aquifers, and pollute the air and soil with millions of gallons of fuel each year. To investigate alternative and more sustainable means of caring for land, see the NYT video "How to Fall Out of Love With Your Lawn" [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMGqvUZjkH8) or this version with ads: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMGqvUZjkH8> Also, see, for example, Paul Robbins, et al. "[Lawns and Toxins: An Ecology of the City](#)," in *Cities* 18, no. 6 (2001): 369-380.

⁵ See, for example, Ariena Van Bruggen et al.'s "[Environmental and health effects of the herbicide glyphosate](#)," in *Science of the Total Environment* which stated: "Correlations have been found between increased glyphosate use and a wide variety of human diseases, including various forms of cancer, kidney damage and mental conditions such as ADHD, autism, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease" (2018: 259). Also see, "[Advocates demand US suspend weed-killing chemical that may cause cancer](#)," *The Guardian* (2023) and in relation to *diquat*, a glyphosate replacement: "[Weedkiller ingredient can damage organs and gut bacteria](#)," *The Guardian* (2025).

Sandburs: The Bur Facts

1. They come up routinely and predictably so. (Here in Virginia, they come out in the beginning of August and continue to produce burs into Oct.-Nov.).
2. They seem virtually impossible (at least in the beginning) to identify until they have sprouted their burs. They sneak up and look like grass until the whole field is covered and it feels “too late”.
3. The actual burs have multiple effects: they cling to fur, clothes, and anyone passing by (especially on the edges of a path) often without notice. But then, after the fact, and an inevitable “ouch!” (to phrase it mildly), those same passersby begin to steer clear of burs and their thickets. Fear of pain then protects the sandburs from attempts to uproot them. The burs also discourage consumption by animals. Finally, the burs contain the seeds, carrying them far and wide and, in growing from the burs, the plants receive a layer of defense embedded in the soil against anyone who tries to pull up their roots.
4. Sandburs do not have particularly strong or deep roots (at least not during their first season or two. If you tug at them and they do not come up easily then you either grabbed the wrong plant or used an ineffective grasp). Nor do they seem particularly resilient. They specifically grow from poor soil which means that poor soil gives them an ecological advantage over other plants. As “weak” plants, they rely on stronger plants with deeper roots and can grow close to them that their roots can entangle. Improving the soil promotes stronger plants.
5. Since they employ deception, it helps a lot to get to know them intimately. The ones in my yard give themselves away even prior to producing burs by having a slight purplish tint to their stalk which typically feels thick and flattish (sometimes forming its own roots). Not totally flat like some of its neighbors but certainly not round like some of the other neighbors. They can grow straight up but also web-like in all directions. They do not have fuzz on the leaves. They have *irregular* stem splits which means:
NOT THIS:  **BUT THIS:** 
6. Sandburs seem to *learn*. When responding to mowing, they sprout closer to the ground and rise up earlier than other plants. In one case, I saw two different stalks one due east of a similar plant which could provide camouflage. The other plant lay due south. Both stalks grew in the direction of the similar plant *as if they knew where it lay*. If not coincidence, then I do not know the mechanism (microbial, fungal, root identification, and/or biochemical signals) by which the sandburs knew how to find the neighboring plant wherein to hide.
7. They employ entangled networks. This makes it harder to find their roots (without getting pricked) and easier for them to shed their burs when someone tries pulling their stalks through the thicket.

8. Sandburs utilize *math* to expand and populate. Because of their characteristic weakness as individual plants, they find power in numbers. They grow in clusters. One plant may only have 1-3 stalks but **they commonly have about 10 stalks with each stalk typically producing an average of about 10 burs/seeds** which translates to 100 seeds per plant.

In nature, 100 seeds may seem small compared to plants that emit thousands of seeds but, due to the durability of each seed, it still enables them to spread exponentially.

I estimate that I pulled up roughly 1,000 to 2,000 plants this season but let's say that I only pulled up 500 plants. Then let's say we have eight stalks per plant and ten burs per stalk totalling 80 burs on a single plant. The total would amount to 40,000 burs/seeds that I removed this season.

This entailed devoting two months to weeding, several days each week, ranging 1-5 hours each time. One could fare well enough working one day per week (depending on the amount of rain, this year's dry season worked to my advantage). However, I'd strongly recommend dealing with them at least 3 days per week.

9. Symbiosis? I noticed an apparent symbiotic link between sandburs in my yard and the two-lined spittlebug (*prosapia bicincta*). The spittlebug (known as such because it leaves what looks like a frothy liquid wad of spit at the roots of a plant or on its stem) apparently gets its liquid from the host plant. However, I observed that, during a particularly hot and dry period here, the sandbur plants that hosted spittlebugs (who spawned adorable alien-like nymphs at the root whom I gently relocated) seemed to fare better and have greener leaves than the neighboring grassy plants. This led me to wonder if somehow the spittlebug actually has a symbiotic relationship to sandburs as opposed to the parasitic relationship it seems to have to other plants (often causing crop damage).

10. Sandburs, like all of us, consist of *transformed environment*. We come from the same general existential "soil" of Earth in different manifestations. We needn't demonize sandburs to uproot them: it suffices to address short-term concerns at their physical root and then enrich the broader environment to address the larger root causes.

11. If grainy soil—low in nitrogen and other nutrients—enables sandburs, what environment enables fascism? Karl Polanyi wrote in 1936 that Fascism stemmed from the "atomistic Individualism" of industrial society which severed the human bonds and relationships that constitute genuine community. This enabled fascism to denounce "Socialism and Capitalism alike as the common offspring of Individualism" and "pose before the masses as the sworn enemy of both" turning "popular resentment against Liberal Capitalism [and] most effectively against Socialism without any reflection on Capitalism in its non-Liberal, i.e. corporative, forms" leaving capitalism "unscathed under a new alias," using the "concept of the race" as a romantic bond between citizens.



Witness the Cycle:

Violence begets violence...

← Bur as “blossom” or “fruit”

← Bur as “seed pod”

Here, one can clearly see the bur as a seed pod at the bottom producing the plant that, in turn, produced more bur “blossoms.”

Tips on Uprooting Sandburs and Fascism

1. Start somewhere. Anywhere. But, when dealing with many at once, start at the fringe—where you can access them without getting entangled. As soon as you find one, take “radical” (i.e., *root*) action, finding the source.
2. Face your fears. Fascism and burs intentionally make themselves hard to get close to. Go against that grain and take the risk of getting to know them.
3. Maintain vigilance. Vigilance seems key as it provides the foundation for education. But vigilance also needs *understanding, action, organization, consistency*, and *time commitment* in order for it to have any effect.
4. You will make mistakes along the way. Fine. Accept that, learn a lesson, make restitution, and move on.
5. Distinguish carefully between actual violence and lookalikes. Remember, you may sometimes want the lookalikes to thrive there instead.
6. Roots feel hardest to pull up when you try pulling up their neighbors at the same time. *Feeling* the roots enables you to uproot selectively and effectively.
7. Vigilance warrants repeating. Learning to tell them apart from their neighbors often feels like learning to distinguish twins. (I can’t count how many times I thought I’d cleaned an area out only to have an “If It Were A Snake It Would Have Bit Me” moment). They hide in plain sight.
8. Struggles can feel like battles which can feel like wars. But, as the Prophet Muhammad referred to *the struggle within* as the *greatest jihad*, this means recognizing violence and fear in our hearts and acts. And uprooting them there.
9. Learn to recognize early stages. When in doubt, let them grow and see if they produce barbs or not. Later, when you learn to see the early trademark signs, you can nip the sprouts in the bud.
10. Uproot with love. Their methods of deception, stealth, and fear do not work well against them. Instead, try compassion, transparency, and connection. Tug at the roots gently and lovingly. Observation, not judgment. Harsh jerks and violent methods more likely scatter the seeds. And violently mowing down the opposition just leads to deeper more clandestine roots. A little care can go a long way.
11. Don’t mistake shallow roots for no roots. They still have *some* connection to the area they grew up in.

12. Wander around and wade deep. Through exploration and spending time in the field, we can find a lot more surprises than we might have guessed.
13. Do what you can. In a moment of haste or urgency, we may want to take emergency *superficial action* by hindering the most immediate threat. But, for any long-term success, we'll want to plan properly and devote time to the roots.
14. A long-term agenda will include improving the conditions of the environment from which it sprouted. For example, one can feed the ants who, with other bugs, can help break up the soil and micro-fertilize it.
15. Plant alternatives. Sprinkle some seeds from nearby plants like dandelions (which they never seem to grow close to but anything could suffice) to help fill the vacuum. Add in rich compost if you have some. Leaving it empty makes it more likely that it will return. Consider healthier alternatives that also thrive in poor soil in order to gradually build up the quality of the area. Just think about whatever makes that area a nicer place to live and grow and add *that*.
16. Keep it simple; avoid industrial "solutions." Instead of civilization, corporations, and machines, which have tended to exacerbate the problem by impoverishing the environment, we can do this work with our own hands.
17. As opportunists, they start from the left and grow right; they come from the right and develop to the left. Learn to recognize their behavior rather than where they happened to plant their seed.
18. Even better than DIY (Do It Yourself): Do It Together (DIT). Working solo can feel healthy and meditative but we can also work together and make the process a (non-electoral) party.
19. Remain open to learning. Although you may feel like moving away or giving up, your immediate home offers more opportunities and new ways to approach old challenges than you might think (if you need some inspiration, try reading *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* by Dr. Suess).
20. Fascism survives storms and thrives on alarmism. Rather than panicking in the face of an outbreak, an antidote lies in moderation and calm, steady, and collaborative responses. Alarmism merely contributes to the fear and distraction that promotes paralysis and avoidance.
21. Patience. Results take time. So don't wait for them. When struggling through a massive outbreak, accept the fact that it will take several seasons to regain balance. When political fascism has taken over, this means working primarily for the sake of future generations.

22. Know the locations where they have clustered. They will return to those same places next season.
23. Keep it in perspective. We may see the violence everywhere. But it will not last. Nature cycles us all. Life consists of constant movement and transition. If we go with that flow and do our work today then, when the season changes tomorrow, our work can build on that flow. When the tide changes in our favor, so to speak, we'll have our ship ready to sail. A massive infestation will take several seasons/generations to restore balance. We build that opportunity now.
24. Value your time. With such matters, *you can never do enough* but *every little bit counts*. In accordance with the seasons, you need rest.
25. Fascism tends to imply "All or nothing." Instead, work according to your capacity and interest. Spectacles of fear will attempt to distract you. Peer pressure will chastise you for trying to "make your own schedule." So, in true revolutionary spirit, have an Emma Goldman Dance Hour when you need it.
26. Take off the gloves and get pricked. Create direct connection. Yes, it can hurt but it can feel well-worth the price of knowing and recognizing the fellow living creatures with whom we interact.
27. Let interaction determine direction. Build relationships based on care, consistency, and listening and then figure out the rest along the way.
28. They come in waves. The second wave after an outbreak can, in some ways, feel even more difficult because, without the presence of obvious clusters, individual ones may crop up here and there without any notice.
29. Share lessons with others. Make note of your experiences and potentially useful insights for others to share so we all might benefit.
30. Expect exceptions. Bow with humility before exceptions to the rule and gray zones, difficult to categorize. A fascist mindset's sweeping generalizations allows exceptions only when it seems self-serving. Effective uprooting adapts to the world—it doesn't try to force the world to fit preconceptions.
31. A loving antidote to the binary of "us" versus "them" restores connections to heal the Earth in the least violent manner possible.
32. We will always have fascism, psychopaths, and sandburs. But we need not let them dominate us. We can live *with* them—not according to their whim—but through our practices of vigilance, mutual aid, and weeding out deception.
33. Travel the world and learn what you can but care for your home.



[Two-lined Spittlebug.]

Concluding thoughts

A dandelion seed is an epic on a parachute. A sandbur seed is a poem stuck to a sock. An elm seed is a prayer book: This way is life. This way is rootedness.
Kathleen Dean Moore⁶

Assuming we will still have a viable eco-system on this planet, the next season will witness hundreds of sandbur plants returning to the yard. Yet, it feels great to know that, thanks to simple labor, I'll only face *hundreds* rather than *tens of thousands* next summer. If I keep it up, then next year I can reduce that number to dozens and then, hopefully, in three years I will have at most a tiny handful each year to watch out for. The need for vigilance will never end but the workload may decrease to a manageable level.

In equating sandburs with natural fascism here, I aimed to both “naturalize” fascism and effectivize means of addressing it. Ironically, industrial society—full of artificial sweeteners, chemical perfumes, neon lights filled with toxic materials, polluting power plants, and plastic decorations—tends to frame fascism as something unholy and unnatural. Of course, when fascism develops *with* industry and *with* the support of the media and military, that makes sense.

Yet, if one looks at the basic ingredients of fascism, it may seem *natural*. Profoundly repulsive perhaps, but—unlike industry—nonetheless natural. One can understand how, in the face of industrial impoverishment, fascism seems like a viable mode of resistance: with people bonding together

⁶ Kathleen Dean Moore, “Books of Ice,” *Orion Magazine* (2013: 54).

through some (largely arbitrary) conception of shared identity, they can feel a sense of strength, power, and security in numbers. Everyone thinks alike, everyone works toward a common cause, everyone devotes themselves to protect the “queen” like ants in a colony. But “natural” doesn’t mean desirable.

Fascism, when blossoming in social contexts, tends to bear traits such as authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, sexism, herd mentality, simplistic explanations, slogan-oriented mobilization—all combined with a quick reflex of verbal and/or physical violence to shut down all critique and critical thinking.

Fascism entails unnecessary and sometimes horrific violence. Any relationship rooted in coercion, domination, and deceit entails violence and therefore we aim to uproot fascism whenever we can.

The violence of fascism, however, should not delude us into the binary assumption that industrial society offers any *less* violence. Rather, industrial society creates and enables fascism while committing far greater violence but in more polished and less spectacular manners. Behind seemingly innocuous terms such as “development,” “marketing,” and “industrial agriculture” lie millions upon millions of deaths each year. The very same society that produces drugs targets drug users. The same politicians that condone and protect corporate polluters⁷ also stigmatize and kill regular people in a so-called “war on drugs” while government-backed cartels, chemical corporations, and pharmaceutical companies manufacture addiction and poison the world.

According to the World Health Organization, smoking alone—which contributes trillions of toxic cigarette butts in soil and waterways each year—kills more than 7 million people *per year* (more than the total number who died from Covid globally 2020-2024).⁸ That includes more than 1.5 million people who don’t smoke but inhaled other people’s smoke (1.5 million = more than the number of people killed in U.S. battle deaths in every U.S. war since the 1700s combined). If one then extrapolates the additional deaths caused by ultraprocessed foods, opiates, alcohol, air pollution, cars, habitat destruction, plastic waste (including abandoned fish nets), and industrial chemicals in pesticides, herbicides, “forever chemicals” like PFAS, as well as radiation, mercury, and lead poisoning... then maybe one can start to fathom the incredible devastation wrought upon our world by industrial society.

This devastation impoverishes the environment and makes it conducive to fascism. While it may feel very tempting to use A.I., mass surveillance, or even the military to combat fascism, such “remedies” will ultimately only exacerbate the disease and accelerate the cycle of violence.

If we want to deal with fascism, we can do it with our own hands. We can begin alone. We can do it together. And we can start in our own backyard.

⁷ See “[Outrage mounts as Republicans in Congress move to protect pesticide makers from lawsuits](#),” *The Guardian* (2025).

⁸ See WHO, “Tobacco,” 25 June 2025. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/tobacco>

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